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Russia Resumes Military Flights to Syria as Post-Assad Ties Thaw – Bloomberg

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Marina Lystseva / TASS

Russia has restarted military flights to its air base in Syria after a six-month pause in a sign of renewed presence in the country after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Bloomberg reported Thursday, citing flight tracking data.

An Il-62 transport plane and an An-124 heavy-cargo jet recently landed at Hmeimim air base in the coastal province of Latakia, the news agency cited Flightradar24 data as saying.

The An-124-100 Ruslan cargo jet reportedly arrived there three times between Friday and Wednesday. The Il-26M transport plane was said to have flown the Libya-Latakia-Moscow region route last Sunday.

Bloomberg said a source close to the Kremlin confirmed the resumption of flights. Russia's Defense Ministry and Foreign Ministry, as well as Syria's Information Ministry, have not responded to its requests for comment.

Russia has relied on Hmeimim and Tartus to support air and logistics operations since intervening in September 2015 on Assad's side of the Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011. Western governments and human rights groups have accused the Russian forces of indiscriminate bombings that killed thousands of civilians and devastated urban areas.

Russia's access to Hmeimim and its naval facility in Tartus came into question after al-Assad fled the collapse of his regime and settled in Moscow last December. Russia later granted the ousted leader asylum.

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Despite Moscow's earlier support for its opponents, Syria's new leadership has sought to maintain stable relations with Russia as it looks forward.

Ahmed al-Sharaa, who took over Syria's transitional administration, met President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Oct. 15 to discuss the status of Russia's bases, among other issues. Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov met his Syrian counterpart Murhaf Abu Qasra on Tuesday.

Moscow views retaining both bases, which serve as key hubs in supporting operations in the Middle East and Africa, as critical amid deepening tensions with the West over Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Sources familiar with the discussions told Bloomberg earlier this year that they expect Russia's military footprint in Syria to shrink compared to the Assad era.

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